Title	Towards a Creative Use of the Alien Tongue: A Study of Singapore Literature in the English Language(<Special Issue>Images of the Southeast Asian World
Author(s)	Kosetsu, Miyuki
Citation	東南アジア研究 (1984), 22(1): 92-107
Issue Date	1984-06
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2433/56163
Right	
Type	Journal Article
Textversion	publisher

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 22, No. 1, June 1984

Towards a Creative Use of the Alien Tongue: A Study of Singapore Literature in the English Language

Miyuki KOSETSU*

I

Singapore literature in the English language refers to a body of literature produced in Singapore by those writers who can express themselves *best* in English though it is not their mother tongue. Singapore, multiracial and multicultural, has a bewilderingly complex language situation, with more than 20 languages and linguistic variants currently spoken. Of the four official languages, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English, the first is designated the national language, but only in a symbolic sense. English is the *de facto* national language because of its racial neutrality and its importance as an international language and, as the language of technology and commerce, indispensable for Singapore's economic development. But for most people, it is a medium only of communication of a practical nature and not yet a language in which to express complex thoughts and delicate feelings. However, this is not to suggest that Singapore poems in English, for instance, have little more significance than, say, Sōseki's English poems written as a pastime and intellectual exercise. Singapore writers who write in English cannot fully express themselves except in this language; it is the language in which they feel *most* at home of all languages and dialects they may have at command in varying degrees. The passage from a poem quoted below expresses in a succinct manner these writers' feelings of uncertainty about their identity; this poet is Chinese in race and cultural background, lives in the Malay world, and nevertheless has to express herself in the alien tongue:

> My country and my people
> I never understood.
> I grew up in China's mighty shadow,
> with my gentle, brown-skinned neighbours;
> but I keep diaries in English.
>
> Lee Tzu Pheng "My Country and My People"

One cannot afford to be very optimistic about the future of Singapore literature in English, or in any language for that matter, when one looks at the general conditions surrounding literature there. There is an absolute paucity of literary talent due to the smallness of the nation. There is a lack of maturity in the language which suggests that, in this linguistically diversified society, where each language is hampered by the

* 幸節みゆき, Department of Literature, Doshisha University, Karasuma Higashi-iru, Imadegawa-dori, Kamigyo-ku, Kyoto 602, Japan

coexistence of the others, the writer can be intimately at home in no one language, as opposed to the situation in a monolingual society. In addition, readership is fragmented [Enright 1969: 187]. However, what creates a far more serious obstacle to the growth of literature is the materialistic, pragmatic ethos that permeates the society; people tend to value skillfully solving real, concrete problems by using practical knowledge and technology and pursuing the fulfillment of secular desires, rather than being absorbed in reflection in seeming idleness, or appreciating arts for no tangible gain. The President of the Republic, Devan Nair, when he was President of the National Trades Union Congress, in his speech in Parliament on March 14, 1980, decried Singapore writers who write in English, calling them "snooty arty-crafty types" and "arty-crafty dodgers of reality" [Nair 1980: 2–3], while one writer self-mockingly refers to himself as, at best, one of the "humorous figures" [Forum 1980: 3]. The tendency to depreciate literature and other arts is not unique to Singapore; it can be seen in the early stages of many nations which developed from immigrant societies, for instance in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where practical skills were demanded first and foremost in the struggle against unpropitious environments. All the same, it is this materialistic, pragmatic Singaporean ethos that is decidedly inimical to the nurturing of literature. The poet Edwin Thumboo laments: "the master-image of a thriving, viable, efficient, go-getting metropolis is the source of our difficulties" [Thumboo 1970: 2].

II

Singapore literature in English began with poetry in the 1940s. As to why it should have begun with poetry, the following remark by one of the most influential 20th-century British poets T. S. Eliot may be pertinent:

> The impulse towards the literary use of the languages of the peoples began with poetry. And this appears perfectly natural when we realize that poetry has primarily to do with the expression of feeling and emotion; and that feeling and emotion are particular, whereas thought is general [Eliot 1969: 19].

The inference is that people first feel the need to express what is particular and intimate in themselves. In Singapore writing, even now, poetry surpasses fiction and drama in both quantity and quality; and it has been constituted almost invariably of efforts of the faculty, graduates, and students of what is now the National University of Singapore. Thus, there being as yet no tradition of fiction or drama sufficient to warrant a meaningful study, in this paper I intend to concentrate on poetry, especially on poems which were written after 1965 when Singapore became a fully independent nation.

The development of Singapore poetry in English is usually divided into three phases. The first is the imitative phase, covering, roughly, the 1940s and the early 1950s, during which people wrote, as an elegant pastime, poems imitating English ones, especially Romantic and Victorian. Cited

below is an example from this phase:

The twilight grey has faded fast,
And darkness on the world is cast;
A lonely bird flies homeward bound,
And takes with her the day's last sound.

The stately palms that tower high,
From side to side all sway and sigh...

As the following quotation shows, the passage is strongly reminiscent of the 18th-century English poet Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," a poem familiar to every student of English literature [Koh 1981: 160].

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me....

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The moping owl does to the moon complain...

Sensibilities trained in the English literary tradition made writers respond to the Malayan landscape according to that tradition. If they wrote poems, they could only come up with honeysuckle and snowdrops, which they had probably never seen, but which commonly appear in the scenes of English lyrics, when what they actually saw were likely to be frangipani and bougainvillea flourishing in the tropical sun. The unexorcisable doubt of these writers that, whatever they write will never be anything more than a pathetic imitation of English poetry, is revealed in the next passage from Lloyd Fernando's "Variation on a Theme by T. S. Eliot":

I would meet you upon this honestly
I was near to your heart and saw your beauty
But I have lost my passion
Why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be
Adulterated dismal imitation?

The "you" here may be taken to refer to English literature. The original passage in Eliot's poem "Gerontion," expressing modern man's inability to surrender himself either to divine love or to human love of man and woman, reads:

I would meet you upon this honestly.
I that was near your heart was removed therefrom,
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?

Fernando's entire poem is actually something less than an imitation of Eliot; sadly it is a mere changing of words here and there.

In the second phase, a period of rising nationalism and anti-colonialism, writers sought to create definitely Malayan poems, writing on consciously Malayan subjects and scenes and sometimes using Engmalchin, a synthetic language based on English but incorporating elements from Malay and Chinese. The following poem is typical of such attempts:

Ahmad was educated.
He never liked his masters, but he was.
He can be a clerk, all thought,
But in his heart he had stirrings for Cam,
Where his Head has been, who was so clever.

His wife with child again.
Three times had he fasted,
And *puasa* was coming round once more.
One hundred to start with——a good scheme;
Quarters too,
With a room for his two little girls.
Kampong Batu was dirty!

Thoughts of Camford fading,
Contentment creeping in.
Allah has been kind;
Orang puteh has been kind.
Only yesterday his brother said,
"*Can get lagi satu wife lah!*"
Wang Gung Wu "Ahmad"

puasa, fasting, Ramadan; *Kampong Batu*, Batu village; *Orang puteh*, white man, master; "*Can get lagi satu wife lah!*," "You can get another wife, you know!"

In the choice of an English-educated Malay with a typical Malay name, the reference to Malay customs, the use of Malay words, Engmalchin, and the particle "lah" which, deriving probably from Hokkien, is frequently heard in informal Singapore English [Richards and Tay 1977: 155], one can see only too well that the poet is trying to be self-consciously Malayan. The weakness of the experiment lies in the fact that writers were too hasty and superficial in seeking to reach what is really Malayan. Inevitably the experiment led them nowhere.

In the third phase, from the 1960s onwards, poets show more freedom in searching for individual themes and styles. There are lyrics arising from purely personal emotions, such as love or hate, and on the other hand, there are "public" poems dealing with social and political problems. The following is an example of the former:

I distrust, mistrust you equally:
The whole field of sun——
flowers charged, choked,
can't stand themselves
their earth electrified

their sky steers away rapid
west-west-wise. You distrust
mistrust yourselves equally.

your roots' stirrings beyond
all right or wrong, water-wise.
Your faces

sun-drawn, tired now, accurate.
Guide me, misguide me
like blind

leads blind, after light
after dark through this
warm sun moist
blood-wise beyond
all taste or distaste
Wong May "Summer Guide"

There is nothing particularly Malayan or Singaporean in this poem. With its staccato patterns, elliptical construction, and naked images, it succeeds in communicating the urgency of the speaker's desire, which is only natural and which unites her to natural things, "flowers," "earth," "sky," and "water," in the landscape.

Next is a poem concerned with the socio-political.

These who in quadrangle, hall and common room

Tabled their dreams in angry eloquence
And saw the mob's rejection and the compromise,
Have shifted from their premises,
Sealed their ambitions in a grip
Of tight cockles dumb within
Dungeons of granite shells
And a soundlessness of mud.
Exile where they may they will encounter
The same creatures riding on the crest
And backwash of the same wave
Rolling in complacent measure,
See how futile it is to shed
One anger against the world.
Ee Tiang Hong "Retreat"

The images of room, dungeon, mud, and cockle unite to become a larger image of confinement, which objectifies the feelings of futility and frustration after disillusionment with some political action. The poem is not explicit about the political action, but the feelings are vividly conveyed.

III

Now I wish to discuss some very recent poems, those written in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, and consider some of the problems of Singapore poetry in English. One observes, in the contemporary poetry scene, two attitudes towards poetry, contrasting but not essentially mutually exclusive. One seeks self-consciously to reflect Singapore society; the other is primarily interested in writing (good) poetry. This does not mean, I must repeat, that some writers are not concerned about the quality of their poetry, concentrating their efforts upon being "purveyors of social messages"; others totally ignore or deny the relevance of poetry to the society, hedonistically writing poems that aim at cosmopolitanism of some sort. In fact, these two attitudes were sensed long ago by one of the earliest Singapore poets. Wang Gung Wu wrote in 1958: "We persisted...not so much for the art of poetry as for the ideal of the new Malayan consciousness. The emphasis in our search for 'Malayan poetry' was in the word 'Malayan'" [Wang 1958: 6]. D. J. Enright, Professor of English Literature at the University of Singapore in the 1960s, who is a poet himself, also foresaw the problem Singapore writers were to face. He remarks:

> They will have to decide whether they wish to be judged by "absolute" (that is, literary) standards or by special "local" standards. The world will urge them to choose the latter, to partake of that new phenomenon, that new "subject," administered fairly legitimately by sociologists and anthropologists and ignobly by careerists, called "Commonwealth Literature" [Enright 1969: 185].

With regard to the tendency of local writers to try to reflect their immediate environment, Koh observes aptly that it derives from "a felt insecurity of cultural identity and affiliation marked by an embarrassment with [their] Western literary and cultural heritage to which [they feel] a 'psychic accomodation' is required" [Koh 1981: 166]. The poets seem to be deciding now by which standard they wish to be judged. These two attitudes are not of literary interest only. For, curiously enough, or only too naturally, they seem to be related to the writers' attitudes towards language and also towards society. I shall now consider two examples of the local-color

type and next explicate one of the "not-primarily-local-color" type.

Once
There was a quiet island,
With a name.
You must believe me
When I say that sunlight,
Impure but beautiful,
Broke upon the bay, silvered
The unrepentant, burning noon.

There were persons in this place.
Too young to know the sea,
Aminah cried;
Harun, who followed crab and tide
Ambitiously, learnt
To keep the spray out of his eyes.
Their father in his bid
To make a proper life,
Lived the way his father did.

Mangrove and palm
Unfold in brittle shades of green.
Houses on stilts, boats drawn up
The sand, the makeshift pier, village shop,
Smoke from kitchen fires,
All frame a picture.

Romantic. Nostalgic.

But images change.

Nearby hills are pushed into the sea.
Tractors roar, lorries thrive
Till the ochre of the land
Scooped out day and night,
Crept upon the sand.
Aminah, Harun now reside in flats,
Go to school while father
Learns a trade.

Along Shipyard Road,
Not far from Bird Park,
A new song in the air:
Cranes and gantries rise;
Dynamo and diesel hum.
Men in overalls and helmets
Wield machines, consulting plans.
A welder's torch explodes
Into a rush of stars;
Rivets are hammered home till
Hulls of steel emerge.
Sophisticated, self-propelled,
The towering drillers look attractive:
This one bound for Norway;
The one before works by Antarctica.

In time images of power,
Our emergent selves,
Will be familiar
As, first, the body learns
This other song.
Edwin Thumboo "Island"

The poem hardly requires explication; one may read it as one would read a piece of prose, perhaps a passage from a booklet published by the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board. Depicting the contrasting landscapes of pre-industrialized, pastoral Singapore and modern Singapore, the poet, though somewhat bewildered by the speed of development and missing the peaceful life of the past embosomed in bountiful nature, gladly and proudly accepts development. The scenes remembered from the past are lovely and therefore help to give the illusion that this is indeed poetry. But a romantic setting and being vaguely nostalgic about it do not, per se, make poetry.

The poem is written fairly regularly in iambuses °′, which begin with the less heavily stressed syllable, and in trochees ′°, which begin with the strongly stressed syllable. For example, the first section, depicting the modern landscape, can be scanned like this:

Néarbў hílls åre púshed ìntó thé séa.

Tráctŏrs roar, ˇ lórrĭes thrĭve
Tĭll thĕ óchrĕ óf thĕ lánd
Scóoped oût dáy ånd nĭght,
Crépt ůpón thĕ sánd.

If one takes a closer look at this section, one realizes that it depicts a scene not very different from that described in the following passage, and with a similar note of confidence:

Jůróng ånd óthĕr ĭndústrĭál ĕstátes
Wĕre crĕátĕd frŏm swámps ånd ůnúsed lánd,
Róads wĕre búĭlt, ˇ fáctŏrĭes ĕréctĕd,
Télĕphóne ånd télĕcŏmmúnĭcátĭŏn nétwŏrks
Ĭmpróved ůpón, ånd pówĕr ånd wátĕr sůpplĭes
Ĕxpándĕd.

"[C]reated from swamps" sounds very poetic, almost evocative of the image of the Creation in Genesis; "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth...the earth was without form, and void," while in 1959 the People's Action Party government created Jurong and other industrial estates from swamps and unused land. "Roads were built, factories erected" matches the other poem's "Tractors roar, lorries thrive" in its assured rhythm. There is an alliteration in "Telephone and telecommunication," and these polysyllabic words add to the stateliness of the theme. The [p] sound repeated five times in the last two lines helps to animate them suiting them to their content. The lone word "Expanded" followed by empty space suggests the possibility of limitless expansion or development of the nation. If the passage from the other poem is poetry, this certainly deserves to be called poetry.

Of course, when scanned as above, for instance, this passage is far more irregular than the other. But this is so only when stress-syllable scansion is used. If one scans both poems as pure stress metrics, which is more natural to English than stress-syllable rhythm, one finds that both have a fairly regular rhythm: three or four stresses a line as a rule.

Néarby hílls are púshed into the séa.
Tráctors róar, lórries thríve
Till the óchre of the lánd
Scóoped out dáy and níght,
Crépt upon the sánd.

Juróng and óther indústrial estátes
Were creáted from swámps and unúsed land,
Róads were búilt, fáctories erécted,
Télephone and télecommunication nétworks
Impróved upon, and pówer and wáter supplies
Expánded.

In its simplicity, the pure stress scansion suggests the emotional sweep——the almost ecstatic confidence of the poets with their vision of ever-growing Singapore. The regular stress-syllable rhythm of the passage from "Island," on the other hand, suggests control being exercised by the poet's creative mind. All this reveals that in "Island" the poet's artistry is exercised chiefly in controlling by regular metrics and that the poem is poetry almost by the sheer fact of its having regular rhythm. If one strings together these broken-up lines of both passages, two pieces of prose result:

Nearby hills are pushed into the sea.
Tractors roar, lorries thrive till the ochre
of the land scooped out day and night,
crept upon the sand.

Jurong and other industrial estates were created from swamps and unused land, roads were built, factories erected, telephone and telecommunication networks improved upon, and power and water supplies expanded.

In fact, the second passage was taken from an essay, that is, a piece of prose, "The Singapore Economy: Looking Back and Looking Forward" and transformed into what looks like a poem by this writer's sleight of hand. The author of the original passage is Goh Chok Tong, formerly Managing Director of Neptune Orient Lines and now a Minister and second echelon leader.

One can read and understand the next poem as effortlessly as the previous one.

1
Here, trees calligraph our confidence.
As we grow beyond survival,
breaknecking the seventies, so trees,
flashing green above the grey of tarmac.

Angsanas, like affluence, everywhere,
provide more than shade.
More than a colour
green is an attitude.

2
On road dividers and on pavements are
what appears to be trees: leafless and
branchy
stumps against the sky, so neatly cut
and planted, you'd think they are made
of plastic.

But if you pause to look, before your eyes,
they'll root, branch and leaf, and you,
you will
be left wondering why you've not seen
them before,
so much a part of the city they have become.

Nature, who is responsible for trees,
is not responsible for instant trees.
The Parks and Recreation Department is,
our second nature and our green father.
Robert Yeo "Trees in Singapore"

This is meant to be straightforward just as the passage quoted below, from an essay "Images of Man-Made Environment" by the Chief Executive Officer of the Housing and Development Board is not meant to have any shade of irony:

We believe that the Government will continue with the present policy of keeping the city clean and green. At this point in time, our concept of clean and green means making the city buildings tidy and commodious, decorated and softened with greenery. This policy can be expanded in future by paying greater attention to urban design and street architecture and by the provision of some city squares, small parks, boulevards, and sensibly located landmarks [Liu 1981: 69].

These two poems, "Island" and "Trees," show the writers' attitude to be self-consciously local; they speak of things and use words that will not fail to catch the general local audience's attention: the rapid industrialization of Singapore, Jurong Shipyard, Bird Park, the "70s," during which Singapore made a great economic leap forward, Angsana trees lining the streets, the Parks

and Recreation Department, and so forth. The authors are self-appointed "purveyors of social messages," or, to put it another way, propagators of the great myth of modern Singapore which the government is endeavoring to spread with such slogans as "Keep Singapore Clean and Green," "Make Courtesy Our Way of Life," "Toward Higher Technology and Skills," "Don't Smoke, Eat Wisely, Exercise Regularly, Relax," "Speak Mandarin, Less Dialects," and "Please Stop at Two." Of course, industrialization is inevitable, economic growth laudable, a clean, green town more pleasant than a dirty, brown one. But is there not another side to modernization? And is it enough for poets to accept the environment uncritically?

Uncritical acceptance of the environment or society seems to be related to the writer's attitude towards language, that is, the way he uses words in poems. One notes that the authors of the poems quoted above use worn-out words and clichés, poetical or not. The poems also have the linear sequence of meaning found in ordinary discourse, whether scientific, political, social, or merely casual. This is nothing to wonder at; the authors' thinking is in line with that of society in general, including the government. And that is why, as I said earlier, the poems are easy to understand. As they feel no need to illuminate experience or reality with a different, sharper light, they do not have to dislocate words into fresh meanings by disrupting the linear sequencing of everyday discourse. In other words, the poets are not making imaginative use of language, and thus the reader needs no imagination to understand the poems. Here, one may do well to ask oneself what a poet is for if he uses language no more creatively than the ordinary man in the street or in parliament.

IV

The poem I wish to discuss now is "shipwreck" by Arthur Yap. This requires detailed explication.

shipwreck: i've written about it, & more,
before.
with an island background, it had only
been composed
upon in school. splendid shipwrecks,
salted treasure
as easily scooped, a misgrounded fly from
an ink-bottle.
the scope of fluent ignorance, my pen
raced. at that age
i chased themes that were totally mine,
weren't dreams.
it was a duty owed more myself than the
pen.

about shipwrecks: were i in school now,
i'm better able
to write on the velocity of wind, oscillations of tides,
the extent of salvage insurance companies need underwrite,
the structural implications on shocked
timber.
can't i?

nowadays teems with more themes.

sheepwreck: (as i imagine) in animate
collision,
each impact cushioned. do i say to you:
let us not pull wool over each other's
eyes
(& other civilities)?
over to the ships' wrecked captains where
it seemed
to have begun & then definitely ended,

to pirates marinated in seasonal winds,
to a harbour where eyes obtain like sardines:
a shipwreck is a tall shore of humanity.
with an island background, it had been composed
on sand, dry inland, crafted by hand.
it can be seen in the city, daily,
neatly.

First, the title. A dictionary informs one that *shipwreck* means, first, destruction or loss of a ship, and second, total failure, destruction, or loss in general. Either way, the title sounds ominous. What does the poet think it is that was lost or destroyed?

He says that in his school days he used to compose, in class, poems on shipwrecks "with an island background." "[M] ore" (1. 1), meaning "more, before than now," points forward to "nowadays" (1. 13). The "island" immediately calls to mind Singapore itself since it is an island state. The shipwreck "with an island background" therefore associates the shipwreck with Singapore. And the association is right also because Singapore has a long and glorious history as an entrepôt port and is now the second busiest port in the world. It still sounds ominous; all is not well with Singapore? And yet one next finds, quite contrary to expectation, that the poet writes, "splendid shipwreck." At this oxymoron one is jolted out of the world of words with dictionary meanings. One is told that shipwrecks were "splendid" because they stirred the schoolboy's imagination into writing poetry. These juvenilia, since they were products of an imagination enkindled by shipwrecks, were like "treasure" from shipwrecks. But now, to the sobered eyes of maturity, those youthful poems, so happily written, like "treasure / easily scooped," seem laughably paltry like "a misgrounded fly from an ink bottle." The word "misground," meaning here "to fall to the ground," can also mean a ship running aground, and so refers back to "shipwrecks." It thus retains the image of a fly within the larger one of shipwreck, thereby giving unity to the first four lines; a shipwreck, a misgrounded fly, and a youthful poem are one in that all are failures. In the last three lines of the first section the poet recollects with some wistfulness how, thanks to innocent fearlessness, he could once write poems so light-heartedly.

In the second section, the poet expresses his doubt as to whether, were he a schoolboy now, he could be so light-hearted in writing poems; he would surely be overloaded with scientific and technological information. This is an oblique comment upon the increasing emphasis on science and technology in the educational system and in society in general aimed at realizing rapid industrialization and economic growth and thereby making independence viable. The "velocity of wind, oscillations of tides, / the extent of salvage," and "structural implications"——these all have to do with numbers. And in Singapore, everything is "coming up numbers." (Incidentally, this is the title of one of Yap's poems.) Koh Tai Ann, Professor of English Literature at the National University of Singapore, remarks in the forum "English Language and Literature in Singapore":

> Numbers all the time.... The other point I want to make is about the style of the leadership. If you look at the speeches, they all bring in statistics. We must be about the only country where the Prime Minister releases a set of tables with his text. Every National Day speech contains productivity figures and projections of trade figures, GNP and so on. So one doesn't really need great expressive power [Forum 1980: 4].

True enough, the prepared text of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's speech at the National Day Rally on August 9, 1983, focusing on the urgent need for Singapore to produce talented people, opens with:

> Our performance for the first half of 1983 has been more than fair with 5 ½ per cent growth. If the American recovery continues, we may achieve real growth for 1983 of 6 to 7 per cent.
>
> However, several sectors have suffered: manufacturing down 8 per cent; external trade down 2 per cent; cargo handled down 1 per cent; tourism down 2 per cent.
>
> We made up by boosting construction up 31 per cent, and banking and financial services 18 per cent. So on our 18th National Day we have cause for relief and congratulations [Lee 1983].

Not only the opening but the entire text is crammed with figures and equipped with tables. The second section of the present poem, therefore, is also an oblique criticism of the society that tends to measure quality in terms of quantity, admiring a man because he has become a millionaire from a *mee* (noodle) hawker, or prizing a painter because his paintings are priced high.

"[N]owadays" (1. 13) reaching backward to "before" (1. 1), the poet contrasts, with his youthful days of freely exercised imagination, "nowadays" when too much technological and scientific, hence rational, knowledge and information clip imagination's wings and drag it down to earth. The first and second sections are written from the point of view of "I," depicting things as his private experience. This personal perspective is extended, in the last section, into a social one, describing the experience, or situation, of society. And this extension-transition is skillfully made in the third single-line section, with the single word "nowadays," which, besides meaning "the present time," implies the present society and its people.

The word "sheepwreck" is coined by the poet. It resembles "shipwreck" in form: in sound, since in English [i] and [i:] make a pair: and in meaning, since they both have to do with destruction. Thus one must bear in mind that whenever one is mentioned, the other is also implied. "Sheepwreck," meaning the destruction of sheep, evokes the image of an entire herd of sheep rushing towards and over a precipice. In the poem, however, the situation is not that tragic; they just collide, animatedly. They cannot be badly hurt as, thanks to their wool, "each impact is cushioned." The sheep here, of course, are people; according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, *sheep* means a stupid docile person and a group under the charge of a pastor or similar director. "[W]ool" also refers to something that conceals the truth or impedes understanding, usually used in the phrase "pull the wool over one's

eyes" (Webster). "Sheep," "wool," "cushion," and "pull the wool over one's eyes": notice how a word begets words and ideas, the poet's power of association working. And note also that this is no mere word-play but that it lights up an aspect of reality.

For "civilities," the following definitions are pertinent: "bare observance of the forms of accepted social behavior or adequate perfunctory politeness" and "an act or expression conforming to conventional patterns of social behavior" (Webster). Then, in lines 16 and 17, the poet wishes to propose that people should look straight at the bare reality and perceive the truth. The people whom the sheep represent here are the people of Singapore, as we have already established the scene of the poem on this island in line 2: people led by a government that is paternalistic, as the sheep are docilely led by the shepherd. And "wool," "civilities," and "forms of accepted social behavior or adequate perfunctory politeness," which may "cushion" or smooth the contact between persons, remind one of Singapore's courtesy campaign, the slogan of which goes "Make Courtesy Our Way of Life." One might paraphrase the passage: the people and society are being happily and comfortably led towards their own ultimate destruction, and yet they are being hoodwinked about their real perilous situation. What form that destruction will take is not clear yet, though one can be certain that it pertains to the spiritual since the people seem to be materially well-off, comfortably clad in soft wool.

That this image of sheep as Singaporean people is not merely a product of irresponsible poetic fancy may be shown in the following passage from a reader's letter appearing in the Forum in *Straits Times* immediately after the Anson by-election, on October 31, 1981, in which an opposition party succeeded in sending its candidate to Parliament for the first time since 1968. After referring to the insensitivity and arrogance of some of the People's Action Party second echelon leaders towards the citizens, the reader, who had voted for the PAP for almost two decades, writes:

> The people in the senior age group have endured and withstood more and greater depth of pain than Mr. Goh Chok Tong can possibly visualize from his reading of history.
>
> As loyal citizens, we want participation in nation building, not to be *lambs led by young shepherds* [Letter 1981 (italics mine)].

In the next five lines (11. 18–20), the shipwreck image returns. The poet says that one should remind oneself how shipwrecks used to set imagination astir, could be "splendid," but no more ("where it [the quickening of imagination] seemed / to have begun & then definitely ended"). The poet states: "a shipwreck is a tall shore of humanity." If one understands "shipwreck" here in the dictionary sense, the statement is nonsense. One must incorporate the extension of meaning the poet has built into the poem: vivified imagination, or simply, imagination, is what makes people human beings, and not silly, docile sheep. The "shore," meaning here "a prop placed against the side of a struc-

ture (e.g. a ship), also evokes an image of land bordering sea and adds to the unity of poem's vision in which quickening of imagination is sought near or in the sea. (This association of creative power with the sea is natural since, as explained in Jungian psychoanalysis, the sea is one of the primordial images rising out of the collective or racial unconscious, symbolizing generation.) Shipwrecks are indeed splendid.

However, notice that one already hears a note of destruction and death in this passage: captains are "wrecked," pirates are "marinated" (i.e., drowned), and eyes, the sensuous window through which imagination may be quickened, are made senseless like "sardines" in tins. ("〔M〕arinated" meaning "seasoned by steeping in brine with vinegar or wine, oil, spices, and herbs," "seasonal" implying seasoning, and "sardines" tie in with "salted" in line 3 as they are all related to ways of preserving food——and preserved food is not fresh but "dead." They add to the unity of the poem. As in the idiomatic expression "packed like sardines," the "sardines" here may also allude to overcrowding in Singapore.) Moreover, the word "shipwreck" conceals "sheepwreck," the destruction of sheep, or unthinking, unimaginative people. This negative meaning, the negative image, and the positive meaning of "shipwreck" explained above, converge to suggest the destruction of imagination. To know how the destruction of imagination can be "a tall shore of humanity," one must go on to the final four lines.

Here one finds oneself on land. The "island background" again suggests Singapore as the theater where "shipwreck-sheepwreck" occurs. "〔C〕omposed / on sand" meaning "built on sandy ground," "crafted by hand" suggesting artifact and technology as opposed to nature, "in the city," and "a tall shore" in the preceding passage, together evoke the image of one of the numerous high-rise buildings which, shooting up towards the sky above Singapore, especially in the city area, are proud symbols of her economic and industrial prosperity and her assertion of the will to survive and to excel. As I said above, this growth owes much to science and technology, that is, rational thinking. And rational thinking is the opposite of imagination which, including the unconscious, sense perception, and intuition, does not exclude the irrational. If so, the "shipwreck," the loss of imagination, which is to say the overemphasis of rational thinking, is indeed "a tall shore of humanity," as it has brought about the prosperity of the nation. Line 22 thus becomes quite ambivalent; and this full import of the word "shipwreck" becomes known only here in the context of the whole poem.

The land on which these tall shores of humanity are erected is described as sandy and dry. This implies that the material prosperity symbolized by high-rise buildings might be ultimately fragile and futile, and it reveals the poet's misgivings about the society, its leadership, its people, and its ethos. He concludes the poem by stating, in a tone of detachment, but by no means of indifference, that this "shipwreck" unto prosperity or fortunate fall can be observed at all times "in the city." Tying in with

the phrase "in school" in line 3, this rounds off the poem neatly.

V

In the first two poems, "Island" and "Trees in Singapore," there is no difficulty in grasping what the poets are trying to say. The end is already at the beginning; that is, the message to be conveyed is already there, outside the poet: a cheerful laudation of the modernization of Singapore. As the message is already known there is no creation, none of the groping for words to articulate unnamed feelings inside the poet, which constitutes the very process of poetry writing. Ready-made words——words com monly used by journalists and politicians ——are placed one after another according to the laudatory formula, in such a manner as to ensure that an equally ready-made thesis is most efficiently conveyed. They are defined in advance, in the dictionary and elsewhere, and are not warped into new meanings under the pressure of the context of the poem. Shorn of most, if not all, associations, emotional colorings, and implications of attitude and judgment, these words are for the most part denotations, and the language, not being the language of poetry, is nearer to that of science which aims at a one-to-one correspondence between sign and referent and hence is much like the language of technology and that of commerce. And it is the language of science, rather than the language of poetry, that predominates in the ethos of Singapore society. R. K. Tongue notes that Singapore English, containing a number of elements from the business register of English, may have been strongly influenced by commercial English [Tongue 1979: 101]. Koh points out that government leaders tend to use expressions and words from technology and writes:

> Recently...in a speech delivered at the Joint Campus on "The importance and the limits of bilingualism,"...on the complex question of bilingual competence, Mr. Lee likened people to pocket calculators, that "some mini calculators can take more programming than others," and "with bilingualism, we are putting into one calculator, two language systems ——FORTRAN, COBOL...." He also said, "with the language is a whole set of values. It is part of the software that is put into the computer" [Koh 1980: 7].

This inclination towards the language of science is certain to intensify, given the emphasis upon science in both the educational system and society, when Singapore has already launched its second industrial revolution aimed at developing capital-intensive, high-technology industries and brain service industries, particularly computer software. Whether language determines or merely reflects the way of seeing the world is problematic. But because it is problematic, one may justifiably fear that the predominance of this kind of language may have some grave effects upon the kind of people the society nurtures. Ordinary people apart, if poets are to be content to use this prevailing language, their vision will be pitifully limited, and they will be only institutional poets, or more properly, commercial-song writers for the government.

On the other hand, in "shipwreck" the poet exploits the potentialities of and remakes language. Words violate their dictionary meanings and vibrate in sympathy with one another, producing unexpected meanings and effects. The poet articulates unnamed and unnameable feelings and perceptions that erupt from the depth of his being and refuse to be confined in clichés. The process is truly creative; for the poet realizes what he wanted to say only when he has said it. To the reader, this creative and imaginative use of words demands participation in the groping towards articulation, and that means having experience freshly illuminated. Therefore for the reader too, it is creative. I believe this is how words should work in poetry. One might say it is inevitable that one recognizes a parallel between Yap's critical attitude towards the prevailing ethos of society and his creative use of language which presupposes criticism of ordinary language.

Yap's criticism of the present condition of society, or for that matter, my positive evaluation of that criticism, is not meant to belittle the industrialization and economic growth Singapore has achieved, much less to propose a return to pre-industrial pastoralism. The poet only expresses his fears about the unhappy outcome that may result from overemphasis upon rational thinking and the language of science. Although Yap realizes a reconciliation of the language of imagination and that of science by incorporating the latter into the former (as shown in the second section of the poem), he does not suggest any way of reconciling the two conflicting ways of understanding the world, imagination and rational thinking, poetry and science, by realizing a symbolic resolution of these opposites. And he cannot. For this is one of the universal questions, continually discussed since the time of Plato, the answers to which the world has yet to find; it concerns the human condition, which Yap says has been his consistent theme since he started writing. (This indicates that Yap's poem is paradoxically universal in dealing with the quintessentially Singaporean problem.) To find the solution to that question is in a greater degree the responsibility of society; it belongs to politics rather than to art. For the poet's direct duty is to his *language*, to extend and to improve in the highest, profoundest sense.

References

Books

Eliot, T. S. 1969. *On Poetry and Poets.* London: Faber and Faber.

Enright, D. J. 1969. *Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor.* London: Chatto and Windus.

Litmus One: Selected University Verse, 1949–1957. 1958. Singapore: Raffles Society, University of Malaya.

Thumboo, Edwin, ed. 1976. *The Second Tongue: An Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore.* Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books.

———. 1979. *Ulysses by the Merlion.* Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books.

Tongue, R. K. 1979. *The English of Singapore and Malaysia.* Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.

Wang Gung Wu. 1950. *Pulse.* Singapore: Beda Lim at the University of Malaya.

Yap, Arthur. 1980. *down the line.* Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books.

Articles

Forum. 1980. *Commentary* 4(2): 1–8.

Goh Chok Tong. 1979. The Singapore Economy: Looking Back and Looking Forward. In *People's Action Party: 1954–1979,* pp. 64–70. Singapore: Central Executive Committee of People's Action Party.

Koh Tai Ann. 1980. Reply to Mr. Devan Nair. *Commentary* 4(3): 6–7.

———. 1981. Singapore Writing in English: The Literary Tradition and Cultural Identity. In *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia*, edited by Tham Seong Chee, pp. 160–186. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Lee Kuan Yew. 1983. The Prepared Text of the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's Speech at the National Day Rally. *Straits Times.* August 15, 1983.

Letter. 1981. *Straits Times.* November 6, 1981.

Liu Thai Ker. 1981. Images of Man-Made Environment. In *Singapore towards the Year 2000,* edited by Saw Swee-Hock and R. S. Bhathal, pp. 63–86. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Nair, C. V. Devan. 1980. Speech in Parliament in the General Debate on the Budget on Friday, 14 March 1980. *Commentary* 4(3): 1–5.

Richards, Jack C.; and Tay, Mary W. J. 1977. The *La* Particle in Singapore English. In *The English Language in Singapore*, edited by William Crewe, pp. 141–156. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.

Thumboo, Edwin. 1970. Introduction. In *The Flowering Tree: Selected Writings from Singapore/Malaysia*, edited by Edwin Thumboo, pp. 1–13. Singapore: Educational Publications Bureau.

Wang Gung Wu. 1958. Trial and Error in Malayan Poetry. *The Malayan Undergrad* 9(5): 6, 8.